

2018

Fi tries to focus on the rom-com she's chosen to lighten the mood. It's an old movie from before the Xavier Hemorrhagic Flu, a time when people still rode the subway and regarded strangers with curiosity.

She pauses the movie. The heroine and her latest conquest are about to kiss, frozen in a blur of bright motion. She sits back on the couch and pulls the blanket to her chin. After a few minutes, the screensaver flips on and photos dissolve, pictures of Fi in Amsterdam, the Eiffel Tower, a beach in southern France. Fi used to shoot mostly landscapes. Now she sorely wishes she'd shot more of herself in these wondrous places, to prove Americans once flew in planes and landed on these shores, packed in alien train stations and steeped in foreign chit-chat.

She watches the screensaver, unblinking. They say it will take decades for the EU and Asia to lift the travel bans on the United States. The next time she rides the London Eye, she might be well into retirement.

Bored of Fi's inaction, the television flickers to black. She takes a breath and pulls out her phone.

Everyone else in her timezone seems to be nestled into bed, running REM cycles and warming percale sheets. She finishes scrolling her feeds with just a few flicks, returns to the top and refreshes. More please. More from those halfway across the globe, from people she has no chance of meeting in person. More from those waking up to start their days, more from those west of here, settling in to dinner.

On the next refresh, Fi's feed jumps with a series of updates from one account, Xatriot. Blurry photos and capitalized captions: *ARRESTED. CAUGHT. DREAM OVER, DEED DONE THO.* Splashes of red and blue, a bearded white man scowling in handcuffs. Fi tries to make sense of these updates. She followed Xatriot for their activism over the years. Nothing too incendiary, just links to articles and pictures from rallies before the cities really locked down. Background static for the world's saddest ballad.

It's not often that a line cast results in any sort of story, but Fi's bones are lit. There's something here.

I write for CurrentUp, Fi types out. Private msg me, let's talk.

Fi hits send and refreshes again. Nothing new comes up. Anyone who is awake has shared Xatriot's updates.

A notification. Xatriot has sent her a message.

Will you guarantee anonymity? I have a record already.

Of course, Fi writes back.

U dont write on one of those shit lifestyle columns do u

Fi sighs. I can publish across the site.

Pics r of Morris Mathers we brke intu Pittsbgh's h2O facility and dumped 122 lb of Xavietrin into watr supply. I'm Jameson Chadury. You can look me up this is legit. Was keeping guard, Mory caught, plan was alwas for me to post and run if he got caught. Fuck.

Who are you with? Is anyone going to take responsibility for this? Do you have more photos?

Yah sending

A few more grainy pictures of Mathers, some with empty sacks draped over railing.

You're going to brk news for us. we dont trust the big news plac-es, Leme copy paste

We'd like to tell you all the long sad story of how the greatest world power fell from grace. We'd like to tell you how the United States of America murdered its own population to fill the bank accounts of a few greedy pigs.

Fi sighs again, but she continues reading.

It costs Simmons Corp six cents to make a single dose of Xavi-etrin. If medication were sold at cost, an XHF patient could keep their disease in check for a rate of \$21.36 a year. It was heralded as a miracle, but of course, that would not last.

Today a dose of Xavietrin costs \$142.00, raising the annual cost

of staying alive to \$50,522. As XHF is still seen as a disease caused by recklessness, people aren't willing to pay higher premiums to ensure care for XHF positives. Pharma patents ensure that there will be no generic available for another nine years. Most insurance won't cover XHF medication because they claim that XHF is a self-inflicted disease, and since Norman v. Eckerson in 2013, insurance companies are no longer required to pay for care that is classified as self-harm, as long as they cite religious reasons.

So, XHF positives must deplete their entire savings for a few extra years of life, risk jailtime for pirated drugs made in underground laboratories or die a long and painful death. Suppose there's always the hangman's way out...

The time to act is now. We can't wait another nine years for the patents to clear, or for other unproven medications to be approved by the FDA. We have a lifeline for positives, and it is held hostage by people who only care about the bottom line.

And that is why today we have put 122 pounds of Xavietrin in the Pittsburgh water supply. For you see, something that costs cents a day—which should flow like water, be as easy to access as turning on a lightswitch—is taken away from people who aren't rich enough to buy the right to live. We've put Xavietrin in your water to make you face the issue, to understand that complacency is not an option. Even if you ignore what's going on with XHF, it will still affect you. It will be in every breath you take, every word you read, every drop of water in the glass on your bedside table.

Xatriot 2018

Fi reads it through again. Sentimental for her taste, but she can already sense the explosions and Twitter fights this manifesto will create. She picks up her phone again.

Who wrote this? Can you get me in touch with him/her?

USER HAS BEEN DELETED.

Fi tries to send the message three more times. She screencaps the conversation for good measure and pulls her laptop from her bag. She

begins to type as the first marmalade rays of sunrise warm her apartment. She calls her editor.

"This is not an hour for the childless," Eleanor says.

"Elle. I have a story you have to fast track. Trust me. Just approve it."

"Quite the ruckus. Let's see, here." A few taps of the keyboard and then silence on the line. "Holy shit. Yeah, you're a go, just fix the typo in the last sentence. What about the source?"

"Gone. In the wind."

"Jesus. I'll see you when you get in. Get everything you can."

Fi rubs her eyes. Her body aches and tremors of fatigue spread through her limbs. The computer burns her lap as she types in her next query.

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A few hours of searching yields thus:

Morris Mathers, 47, was born in Portland, Maine. He attended a small liberal arts school in upstate New York where he earned a degree in economics. He was working in sales for a big Manhattan company that has since gone bust, and was part of the last wave of layoffs. He moved to Pittsburgh to help his sister with her two children after his brother-in-law passed away from cancer.

Jameson Chadhury, 22, was born in Hershey, Pennsylvania, the son of immigrant professors. Following in his mother's footsteps, a young Jameson showed a strong interest in political science. He was thrown out of the house after refusing to graduate high school and joined up with several anarchist groups protesting race inequality and the factory farming industrial complex.

After the outbreak, both men found their way to an independent haven called Merryweather, an old farm 60 miles outside of Pittsburgh. Mathers and Chadhury went dark for a few years, only resurfacing to rattle off an angry status update or post pictures of broken post-XHF cities. It is all Fi can find before their last act of defiance.

A hundred and twenty-two pounds of Xavietrin. Fi counts in her head. That's a lot of pills.

She checks her feed. Her updates have been starred and faved by thousands of people and the share count on her article upticks like a heartbeat.

Fi notices the time. She shuts the lid to her laptop and packs up her bag. The sun burns through her windows.

##

2012

Fi fixated on the two dots of coffee she'd managed to sprinkle on her white blouse, dried to a yellow-brown. She debated whether to blot them with water or to leave them be. She crossed her arms and examined her reflection. Her forearms hid the stains.

She smoothed her hair and left the bathroom, a small rolling suitcase trailing behind her. Her coworkers buzzed across the news room, stacks of papers hooked in their elbows, phones ringing. Fi dodged a man holding a tray of coffees with a tight breath.

Her boss, Curtis, sat behind his desk. His door was open, though he was on his phone with a scowl across his wide face. Fi slowed as she passed and he motioned her in. His woolly eyebrows twitched and he hung up the call.

Fi settled into the chair across from him and leaned so a tall stack of manila folders wouldn't be in the way. Curtis rolled up his sleeves and popped a strip of gum into his mouth. Fi crossed her arms to cover the coffee stain.

"Off for the weekend?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You've been going home a lot," he said.

"My father's recovering from a stroke, unfortunately."

"Bummer. Sorry to hear that. Well, I guess I'll get Neil to cover your stories while you're gone."

"That won't be necessary. I'll have plenty of time in between to get them done."

"Can you handle that?"

"Yes, of course."

"Look, I like you, Fidela. So I'll tell you straight. You're whip smart, but you're too quiet. You're going to have to work twice as hard and twice as long to outshine these other flashy bastards. In a few weeks, we'll decide which of our interns stay and which ones end up hitting the road. PVT is a big and competitive news org. We play in twenty-five percent of America's homes every night, and most of them rely on our site for news. I bet you have it in you, to make an impression. Yeah?"

Fi pulled her arms closer to her body.

"Good," Curtis said. "Good luck with your daddy."

"Thank you."

The whole ride to the airport, Fi bristled. Her body itched with Curtis' suggestions. *Make an impression. Privileged code for woman with skin dark enough to disappear, but not dark enough that I'm scared enough to respecting you.*

No matter. She was on her escape velocity, rocketing away from her childhood in Hillsborough, from textbooks so out of date the ink was all but vanishing, from boarded and broken windows. She was living in Brooklyn, albeit with three roommates, but every night when the lights crawled up the streets, she lit them up, too.

Still she itched. As a younger woman she had prided herself on her invisibility, stayed out of trouble when others swiveled heads. Curtis' well-intentioned advice suddenly seemed true, a string of words spoken from one man's mouth, but formed by the lips of millions.

Fi pulled out her notebook and rolled her current stories around in her mind. She went through airport security half-dazed, testing the weight of different headlines, different angles. Her chest tightened as the plane took off. Perhaps there was something interesting in her research on the decay of national rail plans. Or, the upcoming hurricane season.

The plane turned away from the airport and Fi felt her stomach sink with the altitude change. Her budding career would be snipped off before she could even get her bearings. All that schoolwork and working nights for nothing. Perhaps her father had been right. She should have invested all of that money into something besides a journalism degree, anything else, a business or a small apartment.

Fi rubbed her cheeks. Something would come along. Something always did. Notebook still in hand, she nodded off for the rest of the flight and woke suddenly as the plane's wheels skimmed across the tarmac. She pulled her phone out and turned it on. A text from her brother, saying he'd meet her in their usual spot.

Fi deboarded the plane and made her way across the white linoleum and down the escalators past the historical models and dinosaur bones. Her brother Beni stood with his back to her, head bent towards his phone. Normally she would have found deep comfort in his broad form, his jersey, shorts and ostentatious sneakers. Nostalgia could not erase her anxiety.

"Hey," Fi said.

Beni turned. "Oh, hey, Fifi, how was your flight?"

"Fine."

Without putting his phone down, Beni snaked his arm across Fi's shoulder and led her to the parking lot. Beni unlocked the trunk and settled Fi's bag inside. As soon as he started the car, sports coverage crackled at a high volume.

"No, no, no," Beni said. "Steelers are getting wrecked."

Fi said nothing the rest of the ride and watched the dark shapes of trees out the window. They pulled up to their smalltown hospital. Fi averted her eyes from the broken shingles on the facade and followed Beni inside. It smelled strongly of ammonia and oatmeal.

"Ma's at home for the night, but she's waiting up for us," Beni said, eyes on his phone again.

They stopped outside of room 127's open door. Fi waited to see if Beni would go in with her. He sank into a waiting chair with a faded maroon pattern straight from the 80s.

Gabriel Ocampo was sitting up in bed, a newspaper in hand and a pair of half moon glasses settled on his big nose. His right arm rested limply on the bed, but his eyes, still small, sharp and alert, snapped towards the door as Fi walked in. Gabriel put the newspaper down and motioned her over with his left hand.

"Hi, Daddy," she said and kissed him on the cheek. "How are you feeling today?"

"Fools are letting me go home in three days," he slurred. Frustrated at the vaseline quality of his typically clear voice, he clamped his mouth shut. Fi glossed over his irritation.

"Yes, Daddy."

"I'm fine. Your mommy is very upset. Let her fuss over you as a distraction."

"I'll be back tomorrow. Get some rest."

She touched his left shoulder, trying hard not to look at his right side. The doctors told her he might regain control of both his speech and his motor skills, but that they shouldn't count on it.

Outside of the room, Beni was still on his phone. He ignored Fi's wave, so she smiled and punched him in the shoulder. He shooed her away with a groan and an erratic wave.

"Pest," he said and got out of his chair.

They walked back towards the lobby. In the hall, Beni jerked to a stop.

"I gotta pee." He ducked into the men's restroom.

Fi sighed and held her elbows. She squeezed closer to the walls as a pair of volunteers hustled by.

"Another one?" the taller one said, a white woman in her fifties.

"They're just piling them all in the back," the other, a black man with thick glasses, replied.

"Don't you think it's sketchy? They haven't said anything to us, besides, keep out."

"They probably just don't want people freaking out and streaming in with stomach aches and low grade fevers. It's probably just another run of the mill flu season. Just a bit early."

"You know, Mr. Baker's started hallucinating. He told me I had birds in my hair."

"Mr. Baker's been hallucinating since Woodstock, Diane."

They laughed and walked out of earshot. Beni had finished in the restroom and punched Fi in the arm.

"Ow," she said. "We're too old for the dead arm game. Besides, it's not funny with Dad. Now it's kind of asshole-y."

"You're just mad I got you," Beni crouched in a mock quarterback pose. "I always get you. Besides, you started it."

"I hardly touched you!"

They left the hospital and drove home.

##

2018

Fi's hands slip on the steering wheel. A manila envelope sits in the passenger's seat, a neat stack of papers within. They include a copy of her birth certificate, a passport, medical records stamped and sealed by the appropriate authorities and a small headshot paper-clipped on top.

She slows the car. For a moment, she considers which of the two open lanes to join. The lines to the exit booths are all equally short, only three or four cars in each. Ten guards in riot gear stroll through the grass on the medians. One of them watches the sky. Another looks at her car with sharp, dark eyes.

At the rental agency, she'd had to sign a mountain of paperwork and fork over an extra three hundred dollars for an unsanctioned territory fee. The man at the rental desk assured her in a monotone voice marked with a heavy Brooklyn accent that the fee ensured the car was cleaned properly in case it came in contact with XHF. He also informed her that if she was denied entrance back into the NY metro area, that her card would be charged the full amount of the car.

All those days of buying designer dresses and tottering around in

expensive shoes came to some use. If her credit limit had been lower, she would have been denied the vehicle.

After a half hour wait, the officer inside of her booth stuck his head out and motioned her forward. He wore a medical mask and gloves. She stopped and put the car in park. The officer's eyes widened and he held his hand out to her. The gloves were too big for him and wrinkled around his fingers, the interiors humid with his sweat.

Fi handed him the folder. He first pulled out her statement and read it with darting eyes.

"Journalist. Which paper?"

"CurrentUp. It's a news site."

"What's a little girl like you doing going out there? Don't they have someone else they could send?"

"No one else knows jiu jitsu," she says drily.

If he knows she's kidding, he isn't letting on.

"Don't you have a partner or something?"

"No."

"I never heard of CurrentUp."

"It's the most popular news source for the 18-30 demographic."

The officer puts the folder down. He opens the door to his booth.

"Pop the trunk."

Fi's pulse bangs. "Is something wrong, sir?"

He straightens and thumbs the grip of his gun. She wills her fingers to loosen from the wheel and they stick up from it like the hand moose antlers her brother used to sneak into all their family photos.

"I'm reaching down to flip the latch, sir. Okay?"

The officer leans forward and watches her lower her hand as if through water. Fi feels for the latch and raises it. A metallic pop. The lid swings up in the rear view mirror.

"Stay in the car," he says. As he moves, a glint off the badge on his shoulder hurts her eyes.

She steadies her breathing as he roughs through her trunk, the car rocking slightly at times. He rifles through the spare tire, the sound of the tire jack and velcro peeling up. A few more moments and he

shuts the trunk. Fi jumps with the impact. He moves out of view of the rear view mirror and back to the side of the car.

"Okay, sweetie. When are you coming back?"

"In a week. Sir."

"Coming back through here?"

"Yes."

"Who's the car belong to?"

"It's a rental."

She points to the sticker on the windshield. *Car must be returned with a full tank of gas.*

"What's the story about?"

If I told you, I'd have to kill you.

"I'm interviewing an independent haven in Pennsylvania," she says instead.

"Full of *those* people? Are you crazy? You aren't equipped to go out there. Your family's not all up in arms?"

"My family's dead, sir," she says.

"Jesus. You know, I really should find some excuse not to let you go out there."

"Someone's gotta get the scoop."

The officer sighs and reaches into the booth. There's a sticky klump-klump as he stamps her papers.

"I'm keeping your statement."

"I have copies."

"Okay." He hands her the envelope back. Its surface is covered in little dents and creases. "Last chance to turn around."

"Thank you," Fi says.

As soon as he steps back from the car, Fi throws the car into drive and hits the gas. Her heart still thrums in her chest.